

Opening Remarks at the
Stocktaking Conference on
Palestinian Refugee Research

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Good morning to you all and a very warm welcome to Ottawa, and to IDRC, for this, the second Stocktaking Conference on Palestinian Refugee Research. My name is Maureen O'Neil. I am the President of the International Development Research Centre and it is my pleasure to be chairing this conference. I am delighted that so many of you have responded to our invitation and have come such a long way.

As Chair, I shall try to lead by example and keep my remarks brief! We have a packed agenda and are requesting the presenters to keep within the limits of the time we have provided. More about that later.

IDRC is a Crown Corporation, a public institution created by the Canadian Parliament in 1970, funded in large part from Canada's Official Development Assistance, but operating at arm's length from the government. IDRC is governed by a 21-member international Board of Governors. Its mandate is to help developing countries, through research, find long-term solutions to the social, economic, and environmental problems they face. IDRC's focus is on the knowledge gained through research, and how to empower people through knowledge.

Much of IDRC's work is premised on the importance of innovative research – research that we hope will eventually contribute to policy, effect change, and help improve people's lives. To this

end, IDRC works to strengthen the research capacity of southern partners – experts, academics, research institutions, and NGOs.

IDRC manages the Expert and Advisory Services Fund – the EASF – which has organized this conference. The funding comes from the Canadian International Development Agency – CIDA. The EASF was established in 1992 to support Canada's role in the multilateral peace talks. It is an example of a successful collaboration involving two Government departments – CIDA and the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) – and IDRC. Together, we work on an important foreign policy issue, the Middle East Peace Process.

The EASF was originally designed in 1992 to support all the working groups of the multilateral peace process (water, environment, regional economic development, arms control and regional security and refugees). But the fund has developed a focus on the Palestinian refugee issue, for which Canada holds the Gavel. And it has enabled CIDA, DFAIT, and IDRC to combine their resources and expertise to strengthen Canada's contribution to this file.

The objective of the EASF is to generate knowledge and to increase capacity for policy planning and coordination on the refugee issue. In its latest phase, the EASF is paying particular attention to the very themes you will encounter in the agenda of this conference: compensation, planning for the movement of people, and the importance of engaging public opinion.

I like to think that the EASF stands as an example of how to provide useful research and evidence which may in time help prepare for negotiations and the implementation of an agreement. That means moving forward on the necessary technical work, on such issues as compensation and movement of people and engaging the public in a debate about the refugee issue. Winning over public opinion is a crucial and basic component for any agreement to be sustainable. The EASF strives to keep the discussions and debate going, to keep the file alive and on the agenda. And that is what this conference is all about.

As my invitation letter to you indicated, this conference is the third in a series held at IDRC. In December 1997, we organized the first Stocktaking Conference on Palestinian Refugee Research. This was followed in July 1999 by a workshop on the issue of compensation to Palestinian refugees.

The idea for this third conference was born, I am told, in a café in downtown Beirut, last summer. Finding a way to pull together and disseminate the plethora of research that has been undertaken since 1997 has been an ongoing concern for many of us.

So we hope that this conference does exactly that, by allowing you, the experts, analysts, researchers, and academics working on the Palestinian refugee issue, to discuss and review critically the research undertaken to date. And we hope to put it all in one place in the publication that will flow from this meeting. In these difficult times, we want to guarantee a long shelf-life for the work already accomplished.

But another major objective is to identify the gaps in what we know and to suggest the agenda for future research. The EASF work plan will be greatly influenced by your discussions. We hope that they influence and guide your work, too.

That concludes my opening remarks.

Before I finish, let me cover a few points of how we will run the meeting.

First, as I have said, at this conference, time DOES matter. We have a great deal of exciting material to get through – and have decided to impose severe time limits on formal presentations in order to make sure there is enough time for discussion after each session. We have asked each speaker to limit themselves to outlining the main findings of their research and recommending next steps. We have even gone high tech in our efforts to keep on time and we will see how it works. We have a timing gadget – nothing so simple as a clock, of course – that will be operated

by the rapporteurs and placed in front of each panellist as they speak. As they start speaking, they will see a green light. It will flash yellow as a signal that they have two minutes left to wrap up their presentation. And there will a nasty sounding beep at the end of their allotted time. (Now, I am hoping not to get a flash or a beep since I am within the time allocated to me.)

All of the papers from the conference are available outside this room. Many of you, before you travelled, were able to download them from the special conference Web site where we posted them. Others suffered Web frustrations and will want to pick up a hard copy here.

There is discussion time under each session once the presenters have made their remarks. And we will have all morning on Friday for more in-depth discussions and to come back to questions that you feel were inadequately dealt with, as we try to synthesize and identify what our future work should focus on.

The conference is based on the Chatham House Rule – there will be no attribution of the comments made during these proceedings. But we will use – and you can too – the information from this conference to produce a report – again without attribution. And in the near future, we plan to publish an edited volume that will assemble all of the papers from the conference and other resources on the refugee issue in one place.

We would have preferred a different style of seating with tables for you to write on; but with these numbers, the auditorium style is the only one possible. I hope that you can take a few notes all the same.

Lastly, for those who require a medical certificate saying that they are clear from SARS, we will have a doctor on site on Friday to do this. He will need about ten minutes with each person requiring a certificate.

Once again, welcome to Ottawa, welcome to IDRC! I wish you a successful conference.

And now, it is my pleasure to invite Mario Renaud, Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa at the Canadian International Development Agency, to speak to you.

(And Maureen, as Chair, to invite Mike Molloy to speak after Mario Renaud.)